

JOSEPH JACOB WALSER HOUSE

42 NORTH CENTRAL AVENUE

PRELIMINARY SUMMARY OF INFORMATION

ORIGINALLY SUBMITTED TO THE
COMMISSION ON CHICAGO HISTORICAL
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JOSEPH JACOB WALSER HOUSE

42 North Central Avenue
Chicago, Illinois

Architect: Frank Lloyd Wright

Date of Construction: 1903

Frank Lloyd Wright is recognized as one of the most influential architects of this century. During his career, Wright's architectural philosophy manifested itself in distinct periods; for example, the Prairie school designs, his experiments with concrete block architecture in the 1920s, and his later Usonian homes. Around 1900, he began to design residences which were integral to what is now known as the Prairie school. The masterpiece of this architectural movement is the Frederick C. Robie House, designed by Wright and built in 1909 (5757 South Woodlawn Avenue; designated a Chicago Landmark by the City Council of Chicago on September 15, 1971). Despite the fact that many examples of Wright's Prairie school architecture are found in adjacent Oak Park and that Wright designed at least seventeen buildings in Chicago, only a few of his designs in Chicago are from this "Prairie" period. Of Wright's Prairie designs in Chicago, the Joseph Jacob Walser House is a significant example. Within the borders of a narrow urban lot, the Walser House shows all the characteristics of Wright's mature Prairie school designs: the open floor plan within and the pleasing aesthetic proportions of the exterior which resulted from the unity of the simplified wall treatment, the straightforward window placement, and the deep eaves under the hipped roof.

The Austin Community and its Architecture

The Walser House is only one of several structures and areas of note within the Austin community. From its founding in 1866 until its annexation to Chicago in 1899, Austin was a prosperous upper middle-class suburb. The village was named for Henry W. Austin who, in 1865, acquired the 280-acre tract of land comprising the central portion of the future village from Henry L. DeKoven. DeKoven had received the property as a federal

land grant in 1836 and homesteaded the land. In 1866, Austin and C. C. Merrick platted and subdivided lots in the village, called Austinville. Austin and Merrick's subdivision was added on to by other investors until, in 1884, the village included a territory of one square mile bounded by Laramie, Chicago, and Austin avenues and Madison Street.

Like Oak Park, its neighbor to the west, Austin was a village in Cicero Township. The township was established in 1857, and between 1866 and 1899 its government offices were located in Austin on the block bounded by Lake Street and Race Avenue, Central and Parkside avenues, where the current Austin Town Hall and Austin Branch Public Library buildings stand. Within the township, rivalry between Austin and Oak Park was especially intense and often provoked pitched battles over elections and civic issues. One such instance occurred when permission was sought to extend the Lake Street elevated train line, at street level, from Laramie Avenue to Austin Avenue. The two trustees from Austin on the township board favored the proposal while the two Oak Park trustees opposed it. A representative from Clyde, a village east of Austin, was ill and could not attend the deciding meeting. When the Oak Park trustees left the meeting at 1 A.M., the Austin trustees went to the home of the Clyde representative, roused the man from his sickbed, and brought him to the Town Hall where he cast the deciding vote in favor of the extension. In retaliation, when the issue of annexation came before the Cicero Township electorate, in 1899, Oak Parkers and other township voters gained revenge on Austin by voting Austin into Chicago despite Austin's objections.

Like other outlying suburbs, the population of Austin increased substantially after the Chicago Fire in 1871 as people, fearing a repetition of that tragedy, sought less densely populated areas in which to settle. Transportation between Austin and downtown Chicago was facilitated by the Galena Division of the Chicago and North Western Railway which stopped at Austin beginning in 1866. Most of the earliest homes were built north of or immediately south of Lake Street. The area adjacent to the Walser House was not heavily developed until Washington Boulevard was extended westward to Austin Avenue in the late 1890s.

Many of Austin's residents were successful businessmen in Chicago who had the means to build and maintain large comfortable homes. Some of these Victorian homes, many of which were designed by a locally prominent architect named Frederick R. Schock, remain today. Several fine examples of Queen Anne architecture are located on Midway Park and Race Avenue between Austin and Waller avenues. Also located on Midway Park is William Drummond's First Congregational Church of Austin (1908; 5701 West Midway Park; now known as the Greater Holy Temple of God in Christ), an important Prairie school design.

Austin retained its suburban atmosphere as a result of its large number of single-family dwellings and because of such local amenities as Columbus Park. In 1910, Austinites petitioned the Board of the West Parks Commissioners for the establishment of a park at what was then known as Warren's Woods. Subsequent to the Commissioners' approval, the area bounded by Congress and Harrison streets, and Central and Austin avenues became Columbus Park. The park was laid out between 1916 and 1922 from the designs of noted

landscape architect Jens Jensen, who also designed other West Side parks. Columbus Park is considered to be one of Jensen's most significant designs.

Beginning around 1900 and continuing through the 1930s, rapid residential growth in Austin brought about a change in the visual character of the community as the construction of Victorian, single-family frame dwellings gave way to brick two- and three-flats and large apartment buildings. A distinctive design from this period is the Third Unitarian Church at 301 North Mayfield Avenue, designed by Paul Schweiker and built in 1937. The church marks the end of the major period of Austin's development when numerous distinguished designs were built in this architecturally diverse community.

The Joseph Jacob Walser House and Frank Lloyd Wright's Design Philosophy

The Walser House was designed and built in 1903. At the time, Joseph Jacob Walser was recently graduated from the University of Michigan and was employed by the Goss Printing Company, a business established by his father, Jacob Joseph Walser. In addition to his printing company, the elder Walser had an interest in real-estate development and built apartment buildings on property he owned in Austin. The younger Walser's decision to commission Frank Lloyd Wright to design his house may have been influenced by his father's knowledge of real estate and the building trades.

One of the tenets of Frank Lloyd Wright's design philosophy was the harmonious relationship of a house to its site. Wright and other Prairie school architects recognized the beauty of the Midwest prairie, and they attempted to echo its flatness in designs with low, horizontal proportions. Many Prairie designs were built in Oak Park, River Forest, Evanston, and other Chicago suburbs where spacious lots were conducive to the long, low forms of the Prairie style. Designs by Wright such as the B. Harley Bradley House (1900) in Kankakee, the Ward W. Willits House (1902) in Highland Park, or the Frank Thomas House (1901) and the Arthur Huertley House (1902), both in Oak Park, are classic early examples of the architect's Prairie school work.

Unlike these homes whose plans are generally parallel to the street, the Walser House is situated on a relatively narrow fifty-foot lot, and its plan is oriented perpendicularly to Central Avenue. On the first floor, the living and dining rooms are back-to-back with the living room at the front, or east end, of the house. A central hall divides the two rooms. The entrance is on the south side of the house, and transforms the plain rectangular plan into a more dynamic cross-axial arrangement. The entrance and reception room to the south are balanced on the north by the kitchen. A staircase on the wall between the central hall and the kitchen leads to the bedrooms upstairs.

The plan is very spacious and efficient for a small house. It was used by Wright in other houses, including the George Barton House (1903) in Buffalo, New York; the K. C. DeRhodes Residence (1906) in South Bend, Indiana; and the L. K. Horner House (1908; demolished) in Chicago. Wright continued to experiment with efficient plans for small

houses, and in the April, 1907, issue of the *Ladies' Home Journal* he published a design for "A Fireproof House for \$5,000." In this square plan the living and dining rooms form a continuous L-shaped space around a central fireplace. Only the enclosed kitchen is separated from this flow of space. The plan became a prototype for subsequent small houses designed by Wright and others.

Wright did not view his designs as a "plan and elevation" sequence; rather, he developed both elements in tandem in order that the plan and the elevation would complement each other. From the exterior, the house is composed of a two-story central section flanked at the middle by two one-story sections. The central section houses the living and dining rooms and the bedrooms, while the reception room and kitchen are located in the wings. The north wall of the two-story section projects where the chimney and stair hall are located. On either side of the front of the house are one-story porches which, though currently enclosed, were built as open decks with low walls facing Central Avenue. The arrangement of the spaces inside, and thus their expression outside, are not arbitrary. The near-symmetrical arrangement gives this house a distinct visual presence in the streetscape, and it is because of this classical device that the house retains its impressive demeanor along Central Avenue despite the construction of large-scale, multiple-unit dwellings around it.

It is noteworthy that the Walser design is not in fact symmetrical. In Wright's philosophy, designs were not only organic, or unified, with their environment but were also united in their plan and elevation. With the Walser design Wright was able to focus attention on the house through a perceived sense of symmetry. But he did not force an absolute symmetry by holding in the north wall or needlessly pushing out the south wall. In all of his works Wright promoted an architecture that was honest, not deceptive, in the union of the best plan with the most effective elevation.

The materials and their placement, and the contrast between their colors and textures give the facade a distinct visual rhythm. The house is set on a concrete foundation, above which is a wooden water table. Rising from this are the light-colored stucco walls. The ground floor of the Central Avenue facade is punctuated by a tripartite window set in a massive, dark pine frame. Stretching across the front of the house at the second floor is a band of windows framed by the same heavy dark pine. This dark-stained, rough-cut pine is used for all of the exterior trim, providing a striking counterpoint to the light-colored stucco walls. Here the wood accents the horizontality and visually holds the design to the ground while the flat plane of the stucco carries the eye upward.

The effect of the original design is somewhat diminished by the enclosure of the two front porches. With the open decks, the overall design had a pronounced horizontal effect, allowing it to terminate gracefully at the roof of the central section. The alterations incorporate features from the rest of the house: its horizontal character and the use of dark, rough-cut pine. In addition, the porches were glazed with art glass windows similar to the windows that were original to the rest of the house. However, the massiveness of these two wings as they have been altered is unsympathetic to Wright's intent. They make

the house appear as three disjoint units because the heavy roof lines of the wings stop the eye at the tops of the porches. Neither the enclosure of the porches nor the art glass windows from the porches can be attributed to designs by Frank Lloyd Wright. According to Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, archivist at Taliesin West where most of Wright's drawings are maintained, the alterations are completely out of character with the architect's original design and no plans for them exist. The date and architect for the changes are unknown.

As with other Wright houses, entry into the Walser House is indirect and is meant to heighten the privacy of the family at home and its seclusion from the rest of the community. This is accomplished through a subtle sequence of spaces. The entrance, as previously mentioned, is in the middle of the south side of the house. As the front door becomes visible from the south walkway, the roof eaves form a secluded space next to the house, leading to the doorway alcove. Inside the door, the reception room provides an important transition from the outside to the main living spaces. A band of clerestory windows provides sunlight to the entry area, and on the west wall is a recessed seating alcove with a dropped ceiling. But the culmination of Wright's deliberately orchestrated spaces is reached by ascending four stairs from the lower reception room to the expanse of the elevated living rooms.

The decorative treatment of the Walser House interior is typical of Wright's Prairie work. Wright believed that interior wall finishes should harmonize with exterior surfaces. Accordingly, the interior walls of the Walser House were a tinted plaster with a sand-float finish, producing a surface like the exterior stucco. Most of the woodwork, a lightly stained Georgia pine, is intact. It is effective in two ways: decoratively, some of the trim emphasized the flow of space between the ground floor rooms while functionally, other woodwork distinguishes three rooms within the larger ground-floor space. The original plans for the house show that thin wood strips running the length of the house were embedded in the ceiling, defining the major east-west axis and emphasizing the continuous space. It is likely that the strips were placed in the ceiling; however, the ceiling has been replastered and there is no indication of them presently. The ground-floor ceiling is continuous, but the remaining woodwork clearly defines the living and dining rooms and the central hall. The central hall is demarcated by two rectangular, free-standing posts flanking the west end of the living room and by two similar posts at the east end of the dining room. These posts are approximately two feet lower than the ceiling and are joined at the top by a continuous shelf that aligns with the plate rails around the living and dining rooms.

Other interior features illustrate not only Wright's masterful design sense but the skill of the craftsmen who executed the specifications. There are two brown roman brick fireplaces, one in the living room and the other in the master bedroom upstairs. In the dining room was a built-in china hutch, only a portion of which remains. Another handsome decorative feature is the screen of closely-set spindles obscuring the stairway between the first and second floors. One of the most notable of the decorative designs was the art glass casement windows that filled most of the window openings. Abstracted geometric patterns derived from Midwestern plants were the basis for many of Wright's ornamental designs,

including that for the Walser House windows. It is unfortunate that all of these windows, including the similarly patterned porch windows not designed by Wright, were removed in 1970 by a previous owner who replaced them with clear glass.

Aside from the alterations already discussed, there has been only one other. A two-story addition at the rear of the house encloses a porch on the ground floor and a bedroom on the second level. This addition is built out from the rear of the house, leaving the original rear elevation intact behind the current facade. Cumulatively, the alterations and removals may seem to detract from the original design; yet, in fact, the remaining elements overwhelmingly compensate for these setbacks. The house retains its essential form and materials as well as its original floor plan and the majority of its decorative features.

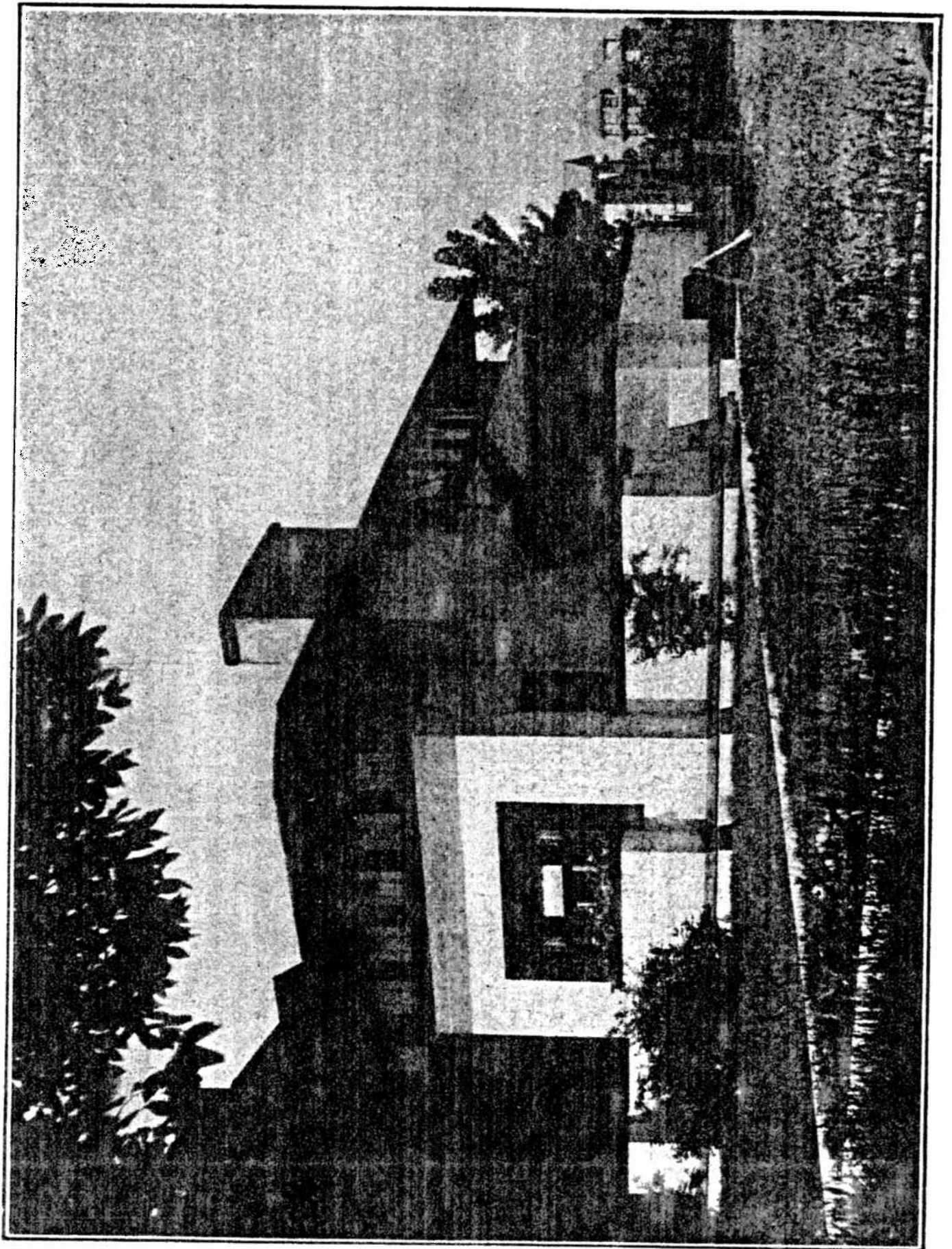
When constructed, the Walser residence was a low-priced house, costing about \$4,000. Despite its economy, the Walser House exhibits the features that characterize Wright's mature Prairie school designs: the open floor plan, the pronounced horizontal emphasis resulting from deep roof eaves and the banding of windows, the straightforward use of simple materials, and a harmonious relationship between the house and its site. The Walser House is among the best of Wright's inexpensive designs and achieves what Grant Carpenter Manson refers to in his book *Frank Lloyd Wright to 1910*, as "something of that electrifying reorientation of the concept of the American dwelling that lies at the root of Wright's domestic architecture."

In Chicago, there is a diverse body of work by Frank Lloyd Wright. This is not surprising because Wright maintained a downtown Chicago office from 1893 until 1912. Yet many of the remaining Wright-designed structures in Chicago date from the 1890s when the architect experimented with forms and floor plans that eventually culminated in his Prairie school designs. There are only three extant designs in Chicago which can be considered part of his Prairie school work. They are: the Robie House, the Robert W. Evans House (1908; 9914 South Longwood Drive; included in the Longwood Drive District which was designated a Chicago Landmark by the City Council of Chicago on November 13, 1981), and the Walser House. Another house in Chicago designed by Wright, the Emil Bach House (1915; 7415 North Sheridan Road; designated a Chicago Landmark by the City Council of Chicago on September 28, 1977) is more accurately described as a transitional design solution for an urban dwelling that evolved from, yet remained distinct from, Prairie school principles. The Walser House is unique among the Prairie school designs by Wright in Chicago as an economical design sited on a narrow urban lot.

OPPOSITE:

The original design had a pronounced horizontal effect, allowing it to terminate gracefully at the roof of the central section. When this photograph was taken around 1903, this area of Austin was beginning to be heavily developed.

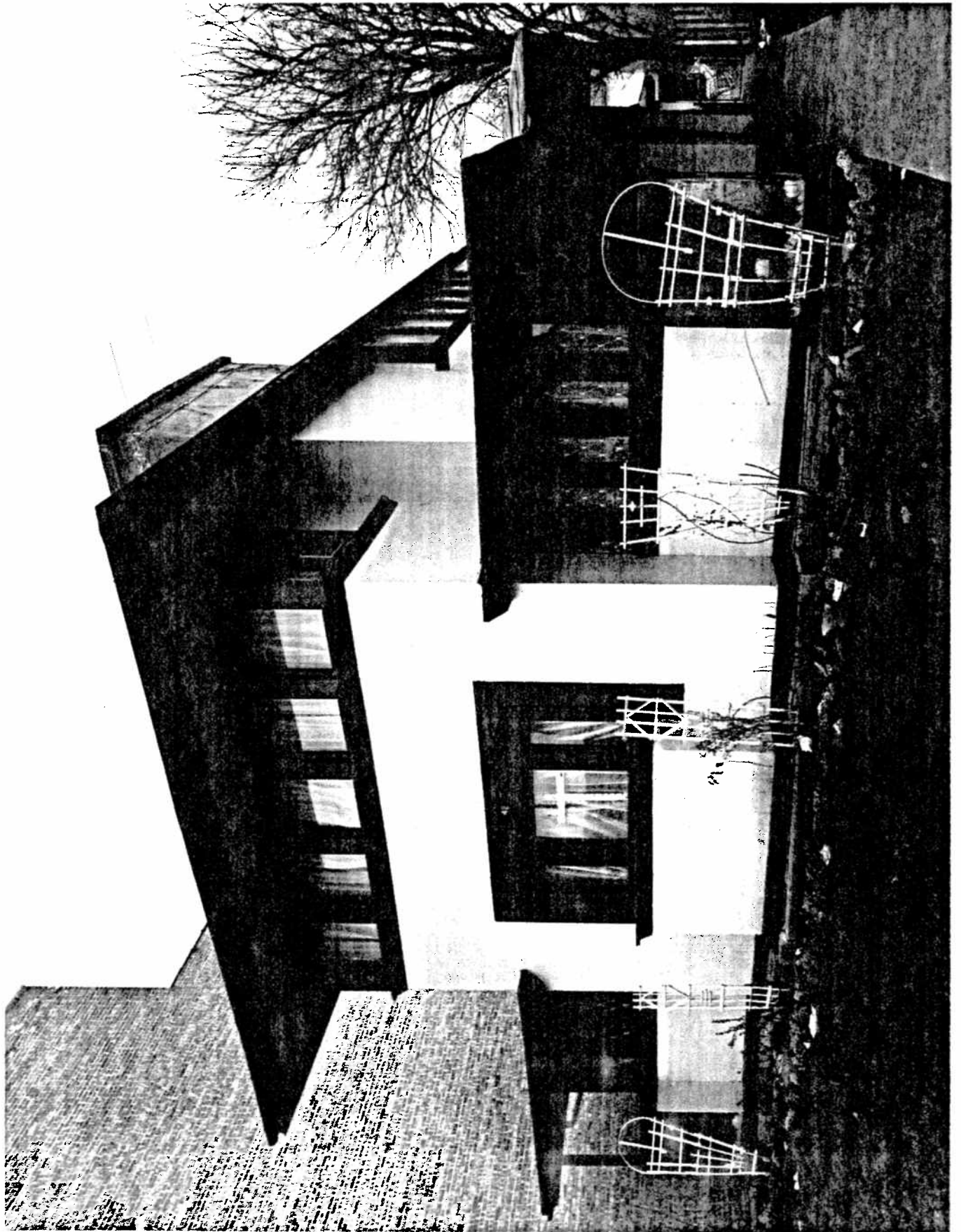
(from Frank Lloyd Wright: Chicago. Berlin: Ernest Wasmuth, 1911.)



OPPOSITE:

The two front porches were enclosed in an early remodeling. While the materials and forms attempt to repeat the character of the original design, the top-heavy porch alterations are unsympathetic to Wright's scheme.

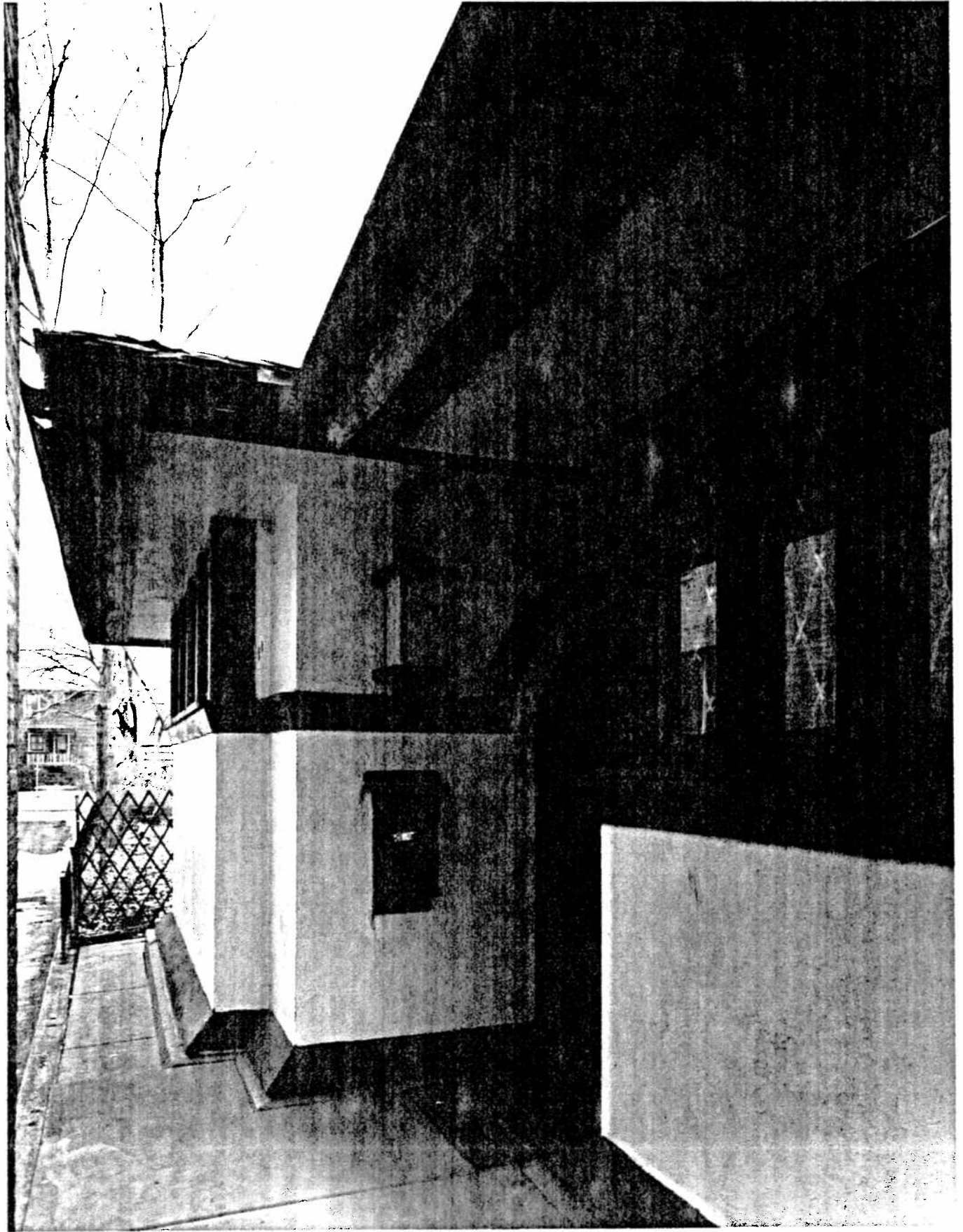
(Bob Thall, photographer)



OPPOSITE:

This recent view from the south walkway shows the roof and eaves hovering above, forming a secluded space next to the house and leading to the doorway alcove.

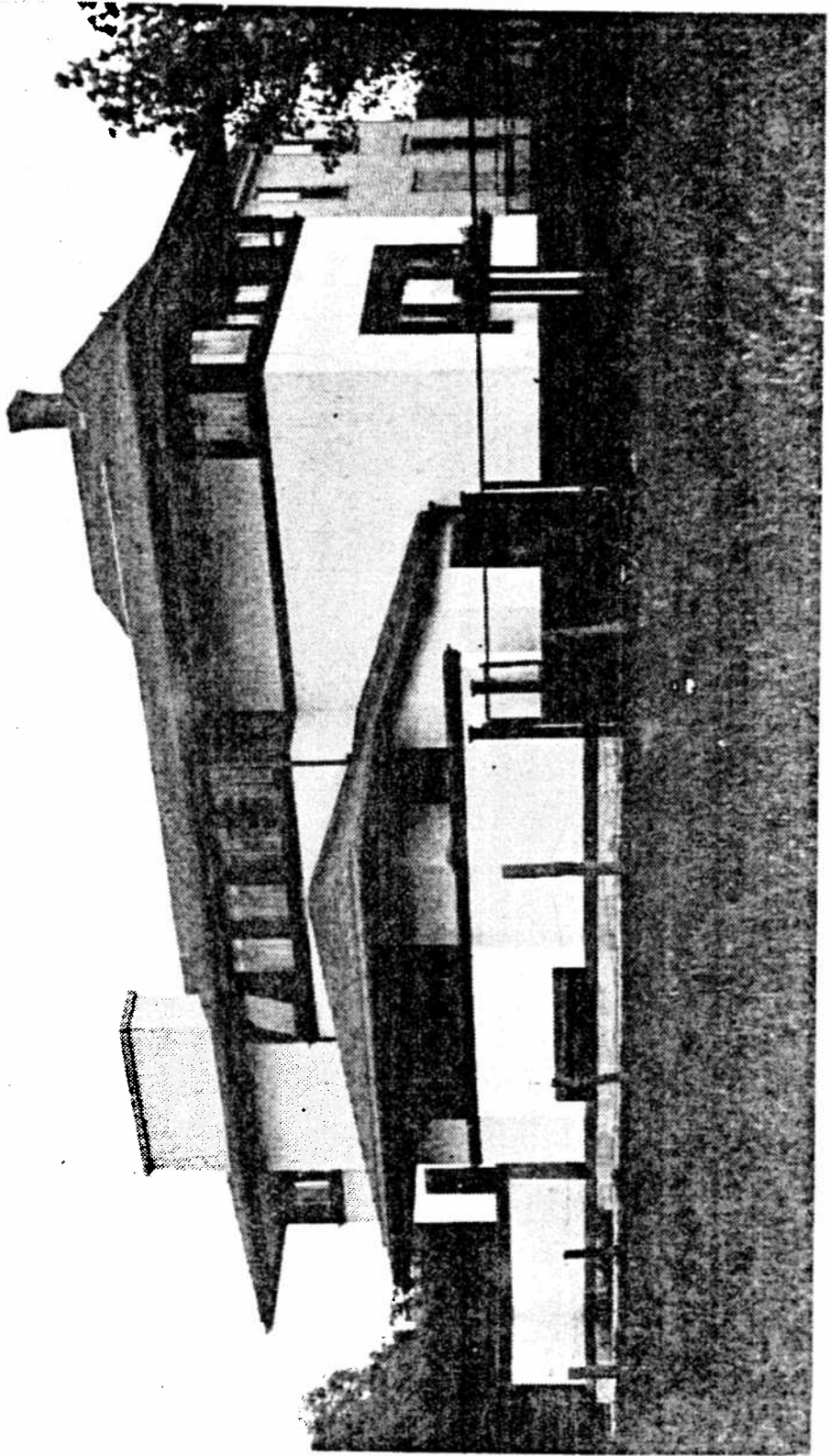
(Bob Thall, photographer)



OPPOSITE:

Subsequent to the construction in the 1920s of the adjacent flat-building, this view of the north and west elevations of the Walser House was obscured. This photograph, taken around 1903, shows the depth of the house and the placement of the kitchen wing in relation to the main body of the house.

(from House Beautiful, September, 1905)



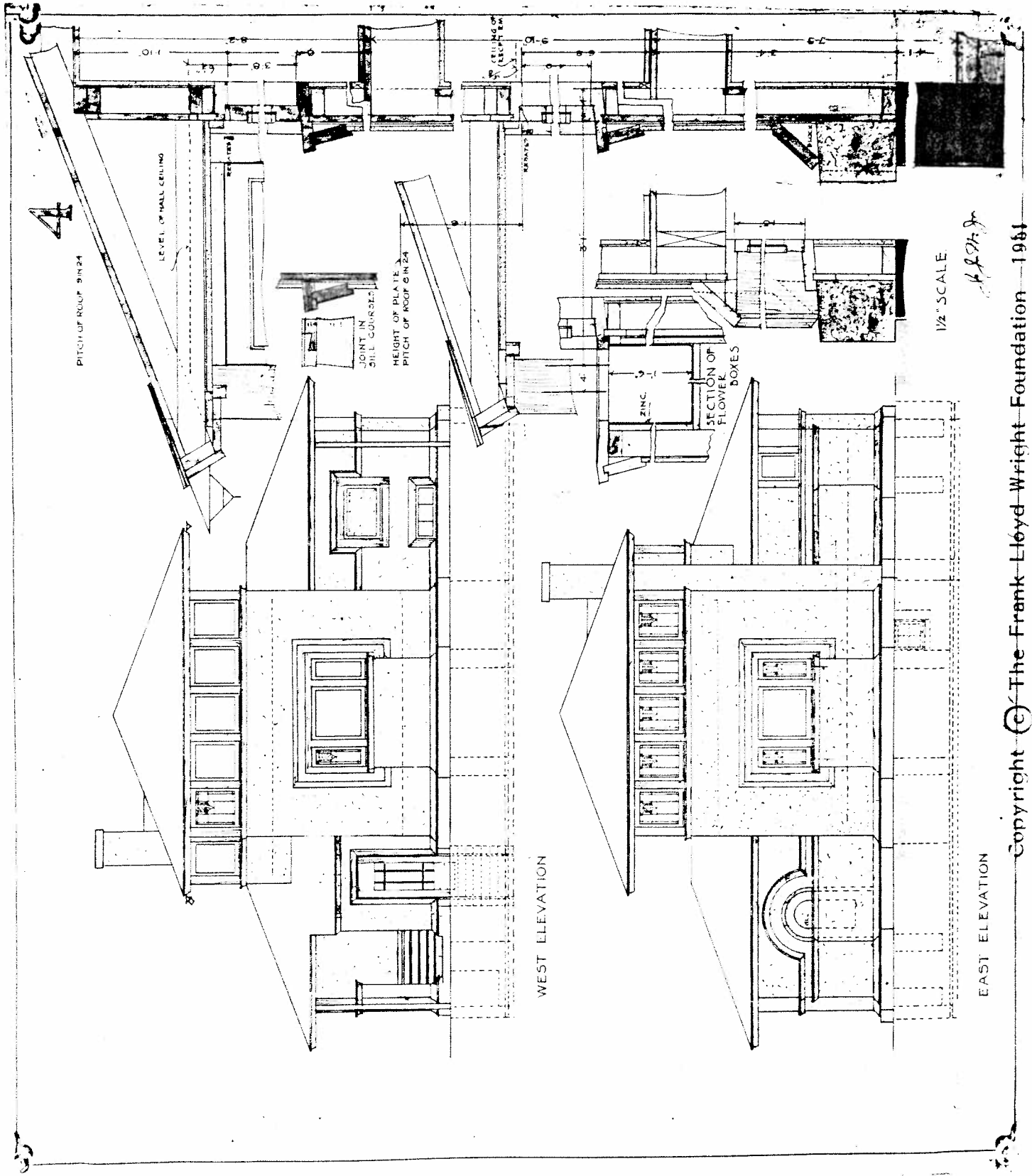
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OPPOSITE:

Wright developed his floor plans and elevations in tandem in order that the two elements would complement each other. With the Walser design, Wright was able to focus attention on the house through a perceived sense of symmetry of the east and west elevations, but he did not force an absolute symmetry by holding in the north wall or needlessly pushing out the south wall. Wright promoted an architecture that was honest in the union of the best plan with the most effective elevations.

(Copyright ©The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, 1981)



OPPOSITE:

The ground floor plan indicates the cross-axial arrangement and the openness of the main living spaces.

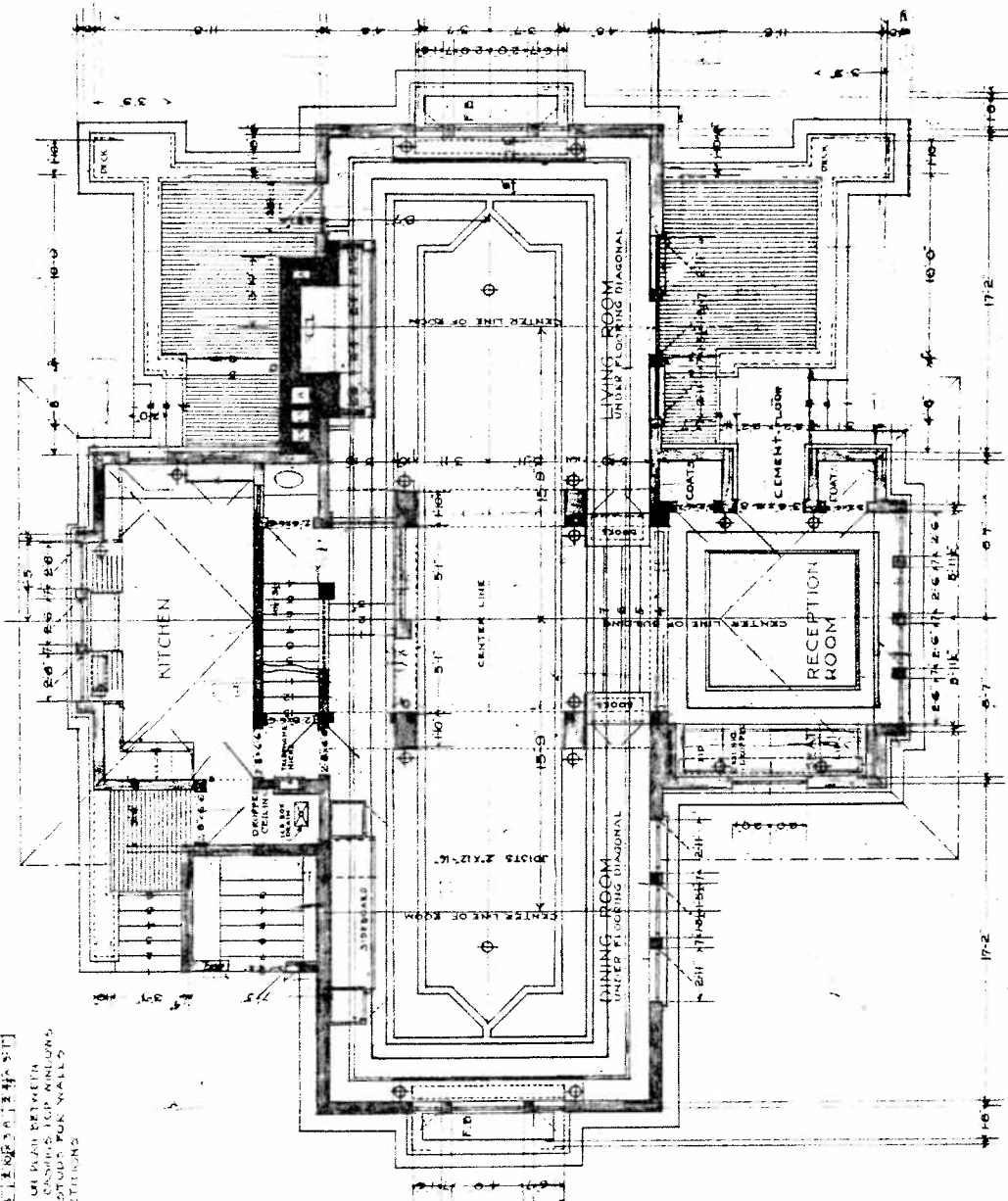
(Copyright © The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, 1981)

2

SCHEDULE OF WINDOWS

LOCATION	NO. OF PANELS	NO. OF SIZES
KITCHEN	1	1
DINING ROOM	4	1
LIVING ROOM	3	1
RECEPTION ROOM	1	1
SECOND STORY	2	1

NOTE - FIGURES OF INCH BETWEEN CENTER LINES OF WINDOWS AND TO STUDS FOR WALLS AND PARTITIONS



L. L. Wright

OPPOSITE:

This recent view of the interior, looking from the living room toward the dining room, illustrates the effective manner in which rooms within the open ground floor space are defined by the woodwork.

(John Vinci, photographer)

